

Why this proposed Old Town building has some Alexandrians on edge



By **Michael Neibauer** — Managing Editor, Washington Business Journal
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In the 1600 block of King Street on the outskirts of Old Town Alexandria, barely within the boundaries of the historic district, architect Michael Winstanley has designed a purposefully irregular, largely glass eight-story building — one that "doesn't compete" with the historic structures around it and seemingly dissolves into the sky.

It is, without question, modern. Perhaps too modern for Old Town.

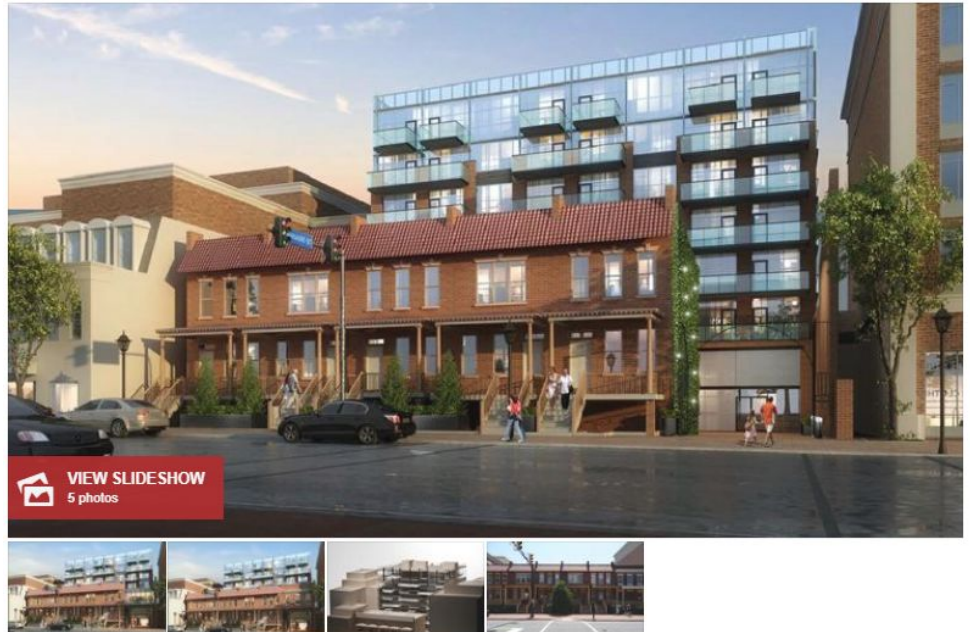
"We have a vested interest and we wanted to share a perspective that seems to be a minority perspective because we're millennials," Kiley Larson, a homeowner on neighboring Harvard Street, recently told Alexandria's Board of Architectural Review-Old and Historic. "What really drew us to

Old Town was the character and the history of the buildings and really the feel. We wanted to start a family here. We really feel like this building's design is antithetical to that aesthetic."

Winstanley, working on behalf of property owner Dechantal Associates LLC, pitched his vision for 1604-1614 King St. to the BAR on Dec. 21. The current proposal, as we detailed on Dec. 14, calls for retaining five of the six townhomes (1604-1612 King), demolishing 1614 King, and constructing a 56-unit condominium building atop three levels of underground parking on the lot behind the row. The entire property is 17,480 square feet.

With the major addition, Winstanley (and project architect Leejung Hong of Winstanley's Alexandria-based firm) proposes to use "brick piers as a way to ground it in the context of its surroundings." But the eight-story building is not symmetrical and is dominated by glass, and for those reasons, among others, it has some BAR members and some neighbors on high alert.

"I find the design jarring," said BAR member Christine Roberts, an attorney by profession. "You say that it's frenetic in order that you don't focus on any singular design, but what I end up focusing on is the frenzy. And it makes me uncomfortable, just on paper. And going to the neighborhood and seeing how outside this is of what's there and outside of any precedent in Old Town makes me uncomfortable as a member of the BAR."



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She continued: "It's too tall for the space, and I'm not a big fan of the frenzy."

Margaret Miller of the BAR suggested Winstanley revise his design so that it's "a little more contextual with the community than that."

"I understand that the use of so much glass is to have the building fade into the skyline," Miller said, "but I'd like to see something more in keeping with Old Town."

The BAR is an advisory body. This was only its first look at Dechantal's latest plan for the King Street site and there is plenty of time to amend the concept. The panel didn't demand a wholesale overhaul, and some members indicated they were intrigued by the design. But like previous BAR discussions about developments at Robinson Terminal North and Robinson Terminal South, the panel's OK will likely depend on Winstanley's ability to design a project that is unique, modern(ish), and yet still takes cues from traditional Old Town.

Dechantal, a family trust, acquired the six "Washington-style" townhomes in 1986. Five of the homes, 1604-1612 King, were constructed in 1912. The home at 1614 King was built in 1918, and was seriously damaged by arson in 1999 during the construction of the adjacent Hampton Inn. It has been vacant for 17 years. The townhome row was only annexed into the Old and Historic District in 2007 — it is essentially the end of the line for Old Town and two blocks to the King Street Metro station, which might open the door to something slightly more modern.

Winstanley said Dechantal is willing to demolish and rebuild 1614 King if that's what Alexandria demands, but it would prefer to bring the building down and replace it with an entryway into a courtyard. The courtyard would act as a welcome public space along a corridor, upper King, that Winstanley described as "tough" to walk up and down given its large, monolithic buildings.

The buildings along upper King might be tall, but Jim Melton, a homeowner on neighboring Harvard Street, said the proposed eight-story condominium will "overshadow" his community, and "we'll never see the sun." As for the balconies, Melton said, "I don't see how that fits into the area."